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ABSTRACT

Many patterns of racial and ethnic group relations in our schools are based on how members of a given group have been included or excluded in U.S. society. Understanding such patterns requires consideration of slavery, the discrimination faced by Southern European immigrants, the conquests of American Indians and Mexicans, the relocations of Japanese citizens during WWII, and the experiences of Cuban and Vietnamese refugees and other recent immigrants. Conflicts also exist within ethnic groups. Schools have historically helped include newcomers in American society and continue to do so. However, concerns about intergroup relations in schools have typically focused on improving relations between Whites and African Americans. Today, racial and ethnic relations are more complicated. In school, social bias and fear of "acting White" can detract from the academic achievement of minority group students. Students in multiethnic schools tend to resegregate themselves, and group segregation and stereotyping may be encouraged by certain school policies. Intergroup conflicts may be related to ethnic or racial identity, group unity, or increased peer status for group leaders. School interventions to reduce prejudice and discrimination include educational approaches that teach about group similarities and differences, draw attention to the processes of discrimination, and promote team building; a vicarious experience approach using books and films that emphasizes the commonalities of all groups; and intergroup contacts during cooperative joint activities. Structural changes include systematic integration, small class size, and use of cooperative learning techniques. (Contains 13 references.) (SV)

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Improving Ethnic and Racial Relations in the Schools

by Harriett Romo

In recent years, several factors have contributed to conflicts among students of different backgrounds: Changes triggered by the civil rights movement, the diversity of immigrants to the United States, and an increasing awareness of ethnic identity. Tensions can exist among different racial and ethnic groups despite the presence of those groups in the United States for generations. Group conflicts can affect academic achievement as well as social relationships. Thus this Digest discusses these tensions in our schools and suggests various ways to reduce them.

Racial and Ethnic Relations

Many patterns of racial and ethnic group relations in our schools are based on the ways that members of a given racial or ethnic group have been included or excluded within American society. These patterns suggest that we cannot understand present day group relations without considering slavery, the discrimination faced by Southern European immigrants, the conquests of the Indians and Mexican Americans, the relocations of Japanese citizens during World War II, and the experiences of Cuban and Vietnamese refugees and other recent immigrants (McLemore & Romo, 1998). There are also conflicts within ethnic groups. For example, Hispanic students may be prejudiced against or hold stereotypes of recent immigrants of their own ethnic origins; tensions may also exist between recent Black immigrants and U.S. born African Americans or between Asian citizens and Asian newcomers.

Schools have historically helped include newcomers in American society and continue to do so. However, previous research about intergroup relations in schools is now 15 or 20 years old and it focused mostly on improving relations between Whites and African Americans (Schofield, 1995). Today, racial and ethnic relations are more complicated. Factors affecting the outcomes of intergroup contacts can include ethnocentrism (the belief that one's own group is superior), competition for resources and attention, and the relative power and status of the groups involved.

Intergroup Relations and Academic Achievement

Ogbu (1990) has suggested that when minority group students think of making good grades and doing school work as "acting White," they fail to achieve to the best of their ability. Case studies by Romo and Falbo (1996) revealed Hispanic school achievement was often discouraged by peers who teased friends about being "schoolboys" or "nerds" if they completed homework or participated actively in class. Stephan (1985) showed that anxiety about dealing with members of other racial or ethnic groups is prevalent among students and can direct behavior in ways that detract from academic achievement.

Researchers in multiethnic schools have found that students tend to resegregate themselves. For instance, ethnic groups may define particular areas of the school as "their territory" (Romo & Falbo, 1996). School policies may also contribute to resegregation. When teachers and administrators segregate students into honors, regular, vocational, and remedial classes that create racially or ethnically homogeneous groups, the classes often magnify already existing stereotypes and discrimination (Schofield, 1995).

Identity Functions of Racial and Ethnic Conflicts

Even when ethnic or racial identities no longer serve as a basis for group cohesion, they may continue to make individuals feel special and part of a community (Waters, 1990). Ethnic group membership may also *exclude* members of certain groups from friendship cliques, social activities, or may limit their status and popularity. This can lead to racial and ethnic conflicts, which can help establish an alternative sense of identity within the school. Often minority students are assigned inferior status in the formal school structure (i.e., they are tracked into lower level courses or groups). They may also experience social segregation that excludes them from meaningful interactions with members of the dominant group or minority groups different from their own.

Additionally, ethnic boundaries may be more or less important depending on the school context, income and age of the student, and social and economic conditions in the larger society. The divisions between "them" and "us" may change when some groups become more numerous or when "old-timers" and "newcomers" compete. Conflicts make ethnic group boundaries more distinct and may increase each group's unity (Olsen, 1997).

Group conflicts may also create leadership roles for students. For example, when groups fight, the best fighters may gain in peer status. As a result of the conflicts, group members may feel less alienated. The potential for conflict increases as students perceive benefits of racial and ethnic group membership, feeling like they belong to a group of loyal friends.

Consequently, schools must make efforts to prevent racial and ethnic clashes in order to focus on academics. Recognizing common values (all students want to feel that they belong) and differential power (some groups "belong" more than others) is essential in order to maintain stability and positive relationships in multiethnic classrooms. Interventions to reduce prejudice and discrimination are also essential. The next section offers strategies for doing this.

Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination

There are several approaches to reducing discrimination (McLemore & Romo, 1998), including educational approaches that combat stereotypes and racial hatreds; a vicarious approach using books and films that present

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positive portrayals of oppressed peoples; and strategies that bring students of different backgrounds together. These approaches would vary depending on the age of students.

An educational approach. Exposing students and teachers to accurate information about other groups allows them to learn about intergroup similarities and differences. When individuals have accurate information, they are less likely to accept stereotypes and to be prejudiced (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Sue, 1995). As students and educators gain knowledge about other groups and their histories, they will be more likely to respect members of those groups and cooperate with them. Drawing attention to the processes of discrimination, engaging actively in team building, and consulting continuously with students all help develop a new culture of tolerance and understanding (Pearl, 1997).

A vicarious experience approach. Instead of teaching facts to students about different groups, a program of intergroup education may include films, plays, biographies, novels, and other ways of presenting members of all groups in a respectful way. Exposure to such materials will help students recognize the commonalities of all groups and reduce their tendency to draw sharp boundaries between "them" and "us." The effectiveness of a vicarious experience approach depends on how the message of tolerance is presented. Poor presentations, in which the presenter does not know the material well, uses biased materials, or has little rapport with the audience, may actually increase prejudices instead of reducing them.[1]

Intergroup contacts. One way of improving intergroup relations is having students participate in joint activities. When people do things together they have opportunities to judge people on their own merits rather than on stereotypes. These contacts are most successful if the people involved are of equal social status, are working cooperatively on something, if their activity is supported by people in positions of authority, and if the activity involves a high level of intimacy (McLemore & Romo, 1998). If the activities are organized inappropriately, students involved in interethnic programs may become more prejudiced. Also key are parent, teacher, and peer support for the activities.

Structural Changes

Relationships among groups are also affected by school structure and policies. For example, Baker (1995) explored how institutionalized racism (in which the schools and other basic institutions operate in ways that intentionally or unintentionally deny opportunities to minority students) sustains negative images of particular groups and maintains their subordinate status. Baker concluded that integrated schools focused more on learning than schools in a state of strain and conflict. Haley (1994) also found, for example, that although strong ethnic boundaries separate students, systematic integration and small class size helped students cross ethnic boundaries and achieve higher graduation rates.

Promoting positive intergroup relations. Slavin (1995) found that in traditionally organized schools, interaction between students of different ethnicities was typically superficial and often competitive. With the exception of sports, students had few positive contacts with members of different groups in or outside of school. In addition, Slavin demonstrated that cooperative learning methods can create thoughtful, equitable interactions needed to promote positive racial attitudes. In cooperative learning, students of different races and ethnicities work together in groups, which receive rewards, recognition, or evaluation based on how much they can improve each member's academic performance. Cooperative learning provides daily opportunities for intense interpersonal contact among students from different backgrounds and is structured to give each student an opportunity to contribute. Slavin found that when correctly used, cooperative learning results in intergroup friendships as well as improved general intergroup attitudes. Cooperative learning methods also had positive effects on achievement, particularly for Latino and Black students.

Conclusion

Ethnicity and race are important ways that students define themselves in the schools. Promoting positive inter- and intragroup relationships can further students' willingness to learn, promote academic achievement, and help youth prepare for successful lives in the larger community and world of work.

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[1] See *Teaching Tolerance,* a magazine provided to schools at no charge. For more information contact Teaching Tolerance, 400 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36104.

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